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Western freeway link to be revealed soon

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Within a week, the Arizona Department of Transportation plans to announce which of three options it will pursue for the western connection of the South Mountain Freeway.

The decision, expected Thursday or Friday, won't have much of an impact on the hundreds of Ahwatukee Foothills homeowners whose lives remain in limbo while the Pecos Road question lingers. It will, however, bring relief to residents, governments and developers in the West Valley who have shelved plans until the issue is resolved.

As mapped, the South Mountain Freeway would run from Interstate 10 just south of Ahwatukee Foothills to I-10 in the West Valley. The original alignment proposed in 1985 routed the eastern leg along Pecos Road and the western leg at 55th Avenue.

A federal study launched in 2001 required ADOT to consider multiple options for the freeway's route. In Ahwatukee, the boundary with the Gila River Indian Community precludes any option but Pecos Road. In the West Valley, those choices were narrowed to 55th Avenue, 71st Avenue and Loop 101.

Political will is almost uniformly behind the 55th Avenue plan.

Led by Councilman Doug Lingner, Phoenix has come out strongly in favor of the original alignment. Planners point to wide swaths of undeveloped land along the 55th Avenue route as proof that the city has banked on that alignment.

For Lingner, it's not a question of whether to build the freeway, but where.

"Congressman (J.D.) Hayworth and I agree to disagree on this one. He's no build," Lingner said of the U.S. representative who came out against the project in November.

Greg Stanton, Ahwatukee's councilman, said he supports Lingner's efforts in the West Valley. As to whether Phoenix should commit to building the freeway, he said, "I really feel strongly that it's too early to be talking about that."

Another leader in the fight for the 55th route is the tiny city of Tolleson. The Loop 101 connection would cut through the 6-square-mile city. City leaders there have made clear that they will challenge in court any attempt to bisect their city.

"I'm sure that we have people who are landowners, business owners, who will jump in with us as well," Tolleson Mayor Adolfo Gamez said.

Prompted by Tolleson's plight, Phoenix, Avondale, Buckeye, Goodyear, Litchfield Park, Peoria and Gila Bend have all passed resolutions supporting the 55th Avenue alignment.

Tolleson officials also contacted Congressmen Raul Grijalva and Ed Pastor, who passed their opposition to the Loop 101 option onto ADOT.

The board of the Western Maricopa Coalition, an alliance of West Valley governments and businesses, will likely support the 55th Avenue alignment when it votes on the issue Wednesday, President/Chief Executive Officer Jack Lunsford said.

Though political might is behind the original plan, the Loop 101 connection does have some popular support. In April, a citizen advisory panel appointed by ADOT chose that link as the best of the three options. Supporters say that the neat connection to a second freeway just makes sense.

"The 55th Avenue alignment is a Band-Aid, and it's not a fix to the problem," said William Palmer of Laveen. "The purpose of a loop is to tie in to another loop."

The 71st Avenue alignment has little support and is by far the least likely contender.

ADOT's announcement next week is not binding. The Federal Highway Administration won't issue the final record of decision on if and where the freeway is built until fall 2007. It likely won't be until then that Ahwatukee will know whether the freeway's eastern leg will be on Pecos Road or on the Gila River Reservation.

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